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ABSTRACT

Student involvement in the area of curriculum criticism would provide a more comprehensive view of curricular and educational needs. Curriculum criticism is premised on an analogy between the curriculum (as a set of materials offering experience to its recipients) and the work of art in any medium. The curriculum critic attempts to portray the experience offered by the work and especially the experiences offered to students. The critic serves as a bridge between a curriculum and school officials who must make a decision about it. This inquiry tool goes a step beyond the participant-observer methodologies of ethnography. To bridge the gap fully, between participant and observer, however, it is necessary to use students' perspectives either by studying students; folk knowledge about the curriculum or to train students to work explicitly as critics. A focus on students and their perceptions of the curricular experience would provide valuable data as well as help demystify the concept of criticism. It would bring curriculum criticism closer to its full potential by portraying the experience offered by schooling. (Author/KC)

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FOCUS ON STUDENTS IN CURRICULUM KNOWLEDGE:

A CRITIQUE OF CURRICULUM CRITICISM

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Focus on Students in Curriculum Knowledge:

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Abstract

A focus on students as a source of knowledge about the curriculum would directly address one weakness in the arguments for curriculum criticism -- the fact that adult curriculum critics can never fully prefigure the lived-in experience of the curriculum for children. One appealing aspect of curriculum criticism as an inquiry tool is that it breaks through the "omniscient outsider" tradition which is the basis of most research methodologies in the social sciences. It provides the perspective of one who actually undergoes the experience, and as such it has the potential of going a step beyond the participant observer methodologies of ethnography. In order to fully bridge the gap between researcher and participant, however, it would be necessary to actually use students' perspectives -- either to study students' "folk knowledge" about the curriculum or to train students to work explicitly as critics. A focus on students and on their perceptions of the curricular experience would provide valuable data as well as help to demystify the concept of criticism to a point where it is accessible to more people. It would help to bring curriculum criticism closer to its full potential in portraying the experience offered by schooling.

Focus on Students in Curriculum Knowledge:

A Critique of Curriculum Criticism

Elizabeth Vallance
Kansas State University

(Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 1981; session #40.22)

There are two sides to this problem and therefore two reasons why I am pleased to be addressing it. First, the focus on students as a source of curriculum knowledge is an appropriate but rare perspective, and one which needs support. Curriculists are amazingly comfortable with theory, abstractions, ideological interpretations, and other forms of evasion; I do not claim immunity from this accusation and indeed suspect that this paper will include some of the symptoms. A symposium focusing on students as a source of knowledge for curriculists is entirely appropriate and may force some of us to veer back onto the real course at hand. Secondly, I find as I massage our common theme here that the focus on students may address a weakness in some of the arguments for and uses of curriculum criticism as a research tool. Criticism has been faulted for its "elitist" perspective; it has also been faulted (by me, sometimes) for claiming to present an insider's view when actually it is done by outsiders. The possibility that students -- those ultimate insiders -- might be used in curriculum criticism comes as a flash of insight, and is one which should be encouraged. It is my hope that this paper will inspire some developments along these lines.

The arguments for curriculum criticism...

A summary of what is meant by curriculum criticism is in order here, though it will be brief; more complete development of the idea is available elsewhere (see Vallance 1975, 1977 for starters, also Mann 1969, Westbury 1970, Kelly 1973). Curriculum criticism is premised on an analogy between the

curriculum (as a set of materials offering an experience to its recipients) and the "work of art" (in any medium). Whatever else a work may accomplish in terms of "outcomes" and so on, it is also the basis for a very intensive "lived-in" experience (Mann 1969). In the case of the curriculum, most of the people having this lived-in experience are students. Though these students are below the age of consent, and as such their experience with the curriculum is mandatory (unlike the experience of adult patrons of the arts), the role of the critic in the two situations is arguably similar. The critic is a person to whom the work of art makes sense, who is willing to analyze it in search of a hidden order that may not initially be apparent to the average viewer. More than this, the critic is responsible for serving as a kind of bridge or translator between the work of art and the relatively untutored viewer, rendering the message expressed in the artistic medium (painting, dance, music, photography, drama, sculpture) into a medium accessible to others. This medium is usually ordinary language. Whether the critic's perceptions are "true" or accurate is a question each reader can decide only by comparing the verbal rendering of the work to the work itself; in this sense the critic is never the final arbiter but only an intelligent guide.

Criticism presumes that any work of art is worthy of attention on its own merit. Any work of art presents us with a slice of the artist's experience with the world, interpreted through his particular filters and presented in the particular idiom of his style. The work of art is in this sense a "bracketing" or framing of the artist's perceptions, a selection from all the views that are possible. The "framing" is quite literal in the case of a painting or a photograph, where the boundaries are deliberately established and essential to the composition; it is no less salient in a work of dance or drama or literature. In every case, the artist is constructing an artifact

which will color and structure the experience of each person encountering it. To look at a painting even briefly is to momentarily accept the bracketing that the artist has made of his vision; to read a poem is to enter into the poet's selection of feelings, ideas, and images.

Were artists fully accepted as commentators in their own right, critics would be unnecessary. Since this is not the case, and since many artists communicate in a language accessible only to a few, deliberately operating at the fringes of our common language (Marcuse), the art critic is welcomed, or at least tolerated. Our receptivity to critics signals that the language of art is translatable, that we have not totally discounted the "impractical" and special visions of artists; aesthetic criticism serves as a rich source of understanding of messages that might otherwise go unheeded. The critic, then, is a kind of teacher, willing to try to understand artful communications and to communicate them to others. The critic accepts the boundaries of the artist's "bracketing", is willing to accord this selective vision an intrinsic value, and can legitimately ignore such prosaic qualities as the "learning outcomes" of a painting (do we ever wonder what competencies Corot will teach us? do we care what Mozart's objectives were?) or its articulation with others around it (though the placement might be strange, hanging Monet's "Water Lilies" next to an abstraction by Hans Hoffman doesn't really affect the value of either). Each work can be assessed in its own terms. Each offers its own experience.

...an alternative to the "omniscient outsider" tradition

Much of this is news to curriculists, or was a decade ago when the analogy between the curriculum and works of art was suggested (Mann 1969, Westbury 1970). The uses of criticism in curriculum evaluation and inquiry were first argued at

a time when curriculists were hot on the trail of behavioral objectives, engaged in generating "objective" and replicable conclusions about the curriculum. Most of these conclusions, true to their roots in experimental social science, had to do with the predictable effects of specific variables on desirable outcomes. Our concern in educational research was mostly with getting measurable results worthy of our trust; still making up for the lost time suddenly revealed by Sputnik, we were much concerned with how effective the curriculum was. Our current infatuation with accountability, competency testing, and teaching marketable skills suggests that we still are. Our longstanding interest in the curriculum has always been that it "work".

Given this milieu, we have naturally been less inclined to spend time worrying about the aesthetic satisfactions offered by a curriculum, or about its value as an experience unto itself. We have rarely considered the curriculum as a work of art whose value is in the experience it offers to its captors. Curriculum criticism defines a different focus for our research, and is proposed as a means of cutting through the outcomes/objectives/group-norms view of the curriculum, focusing instead on its value as a selection of experience. The critical perspective sees the student as a participant in the world view framed by the curriculum developer, reacting to content and ideas presented by the developer through the idiom of the developer's style and purpose. The curriculum critic, in this configuration, serves as a bridge between the work itself and the individuals who must make judgments about it (most of these are adults). Thus, just as the art critic is a bridge between a deKooning painting and museum-goers who want to "understand" this painting, the curriculum critic is a bridge between a curriculum and school officials who want to understand it because they must make a decision about it. In both cases, the critic attempts to portray the experience offered by the work, and especially the

experiences offered to students. And the student perspective, we assume, is more immersed in the lived-in actualities of the experience than in the objectives or national norms or standard deviation of their cohort.

It is noteworthy that criticism's claim to present the insider's view is somewhat new to educational research not only as a focus but as a methodology. Educational research, under some self-imposed pressure to emulate the "hard sciences" and thereby to generate replicable, clean, and generalizable data, has necessarily adhered to the tradition of the researcher as thoughtful outsider looking in. Scores of control procedures and blinding techniques have been developed to ensure the impartiality and uninvolvement of the researcher in the situation being studied. The kind of humble omniscience presumed of the researcher has allowed him/her to offer generalizations about schooling which are presumed to be relatively uncontaminated by researcher bias. Just as we assume the physicist is not guiding the behavior of the atoms he is studying, so we would like to assume that the educational researcher is not guiding the actions of students or teachers being scrutinized.

Consider, by way of illustration, the range of inquiry modes now available to us in curriculum research. They include pre/post-test gain scores, tabulated data from classroom interaction schedules, assorted measures of achievement referring to a variety of kinds of objectives (lately including "competency" measures), observer and participant-observer records from ethnographic studies of classrooms, studies of textbook adoption patterns, curriculum implementation studies, teacher self-perception studies, and a variety of other indices of the nature, quality, and effectiveness of curricular encounters of various kinds. Together these approaches to research and evaluation provide a tremendously rich body of

data. Most of them present outsiders' views of what is going on. The closest we have come to insiders' views of schooling are in participant observation studies and in some forms of educational ethnography, both of which attempt to portray a situation from the veiwpoint of someone involved in it and not merely studying it. Ethnography and related methodologies have partially broken the tradition of the "impartial" outside observer, though not without much discussion as to whether such research is "objective" and generalizable. Even the participant-researcher methods, however, do not provide us with real insiders' perceptions of the situations; a researcher in disguise is not the same as a real fourth-grader struggling with a real textbook.

These difficulties are partially avoided in traditional art criticism, which accepts the insider's view as valid and instructive. To a great extent, an art critic <u>is</u> a real viewer struggling with his/her perceptions of a real artistic problem, and the critic's response is analogous to that of at least some other insiders to the experience. That the critic is somehow more informed and more receptive than other viewers is less crucial than that both critic and "other viewer" come to the experience in somewhat similar ways. Thus, both go to the museum (or concert, or etc.) voluntarily; both are, in most cases, adults able to recognize some of the elements in the work as deriving from everyday life or from established cultural traditions; both may be encountering the work as a new experience to some degree; both will seek to "make sense" of it in some terms. And so on. In all these respects, the critic's role is an insider's one, helping others to see the experience that the work actually offers to other potential insiders.

The art critic and the curriculum critic, however, are not fully analogous, though their similarities are important. In both cases, the critic knows the medium, chooses to attend the event in question, is sufficiently familiar with the potential of the medium to be sensitive to unexpected nuances in its use, and attempts to communicate his/her experience of the work to others whose perceptions of (or practical decisions about) the same event may need guidance. The difference, though, is that the art critic is generally an adult, carrying all the cultural baggage of adult society and using it as a filter to describe what the work of art offers to other adults. The art critic can assume that the readers, who are potential participants in the artistic event on a level similar to his/her own, at least speak the same language: they can follow certain metaphors, recognize certain symbols, know what "magenta" is. As a result, the critic can assume that the readers' experience with the work will be analogous in at least some respects to his or her own, and that his/her experience with the work is authentic. The same cannot be said of the curriculum critic.

It is in this respect that the analogy between curriculum criticism and art criticism does not entirely fit. No adult's perceptions of a curriculum can authentically reflect the experience that curriculum offers to those who "really" experience it -- the students. While a curriculum critic's experience with curriculum materials may accurately prefigure another adult's experience with them, the critic's descriptions and interpretations may bear only minimal resemblance to the experience that the same materials offer to an unsuspecting and captive student. In this respect the critic retains the outside omniscience reserved for the traditional researcher; just as an ethnographer not really a member of the

tribe being observed, neither is a critic really a student doing a required assignment. Insofar as criticism attempts to portray the lived-in quality of the curriculum, the non-student point of view on which it relies is a rather severe limitation. It is one we have easily accepted, however, since it fits so unobtrusively into our traditions of research methodology.

To complete the analogy with art criticism would require us to more closely approach the viewpoint of those actually encountering the curricular experience. Since the curricular qualities we are most interested in are those affecting not other adults but kids, it seems logical to involve students' perspectives in curriculum criticism. Few of our efforts to train ourselves to be good curriculum critics have yet gone so far as to include actual insiders in the effort; it may finally be time we did so, demystifying the concept of "criticism" in the process.

Criticism as folk knowledge (and vice versa)

Demystifying the concept of criticism seems important here, for in our culture both the artist and the art critic have achieved a kind of aura which, I believe, is intimidating to many of us. If the critic succeeds because the language of art is so arcane as to require translation into ordinary language, the critic by the same token shares some of this arcaneness and is perceived to have special powers that are only made available to us thanks to the Sunday papers and intellectual magazines. This is to some extent true, of course; Pauline Kael, Jack Kroll, and Vincent Canby do seem able to see things in movies better (or anyway more quickly) than the rest of us do -- they may be less arcane than the filmmakers, but they certainly seem more arcane than most of us. To claim that the art critic and the art-going general public are equivalently "insiders" to any artistic experience is to overstate the case; the art critic has the advantage of much more full-time immersion in the medium, and is liable to be much more attuned to

subtleties in its use. Pauline Kael saw qualities in "Last Tango in Paris" which had escaped other viewers. Critics endure because their perceptions have in fact made sense to their readers.

But art critics are not the only people who have intelligent things to say about their encounters with art, and indeed they are most successful if their readers also learn to be astute. Art criticism occurs on many levels, even down to the level of the I-don't-know-art-but-I-know-what-I-like approach, and all of them have an impact on the perceptions of people exposed to them. Without being so naive as to assert that all perceptions of art are equally valuable and eqully sensitive to the qualities of the work in question (people who like certain movies because they have "happy endings" are, it seems to me, missing much of the point of the film medium), still we can see that there is a kind of popular art criticism which could tell us a great deal about the role of art in our culture if we were to systematically study it. Similarly it seems likely that some of the folk wisdom about curricula, as expressed by those undergoing them -- that is, students -- might tell us a great deal.

Consider, for example, that although a lot of us read critics and reviewers in working out our experiences of movies or plays or whatever, most of us do in fact converse among ourselves about these same experiences in order to better understand them. Whether or not we bone up on the reviews at all, most of us have comments to make about the art we have seen; surely this urge to communicate and test our perceptions on one another helps account for the tradition of going out for drinks with friends after a play. In these informal criticism sessions we typically cover various aspects of the performance: we may seek clarifications of a plot twist, or comment on strengths and weaknesses of the actors, or compare this performance to another seen earlier, or examine what the director was

attempting to communicate with a particularly novel production, or report our own feelings of excitement/impatience/boredom/tension with the performance, or try to sort out the reasons why we liked or disliked it. And so forth. We may learn more about our own reactions to a performance through these conversations than from reading Clive Barnes or the local movie reviewer. A friend's comments on a movie may more strongly influence our decision to see it than any review does.

Students, of course, do much the same thing, though their perceptions (like our own) are rarely accorded the dignity of "criticism" in the aesthetic-criticism sense; aside from essays or editorials in the school paper, student reviews of curricula are rarely made publically available to be tested by anyone else. Student reviews of curricular encounters remain largely in the realm of folk knowledge; we know from experience, however, that the effect of these "reviews" on curricular decisions can be very powerful in cases where students are free to act on them. The choice of electives by college students frequently involves word-of-mouth information on qualities only indirectly related to how much it "teaches" -- student choices may be affected by a dynamic lecturer, by a professor who lectures drily but clearly loves his or her subject, by a professor's attitude toward and availability to students, by an effective use of a variety of teaching techniques. A high-school student who is annoyed by boring homework assignments, or impatient with a teacher's officiousness, or appreciative of the amount of time given to difficult problems, or annoyed at the restrictiveness of study hall is reacting to qualities of the "lived-in" nature of schooling. A first-grader who sees her teacher as "nice" is doing the same thing. All are reacting to qualities which, while they

may affect the "learning outcomes" of a curriculum, are also -- and primarily -- aesthetic qualities coloring the experience it provides to kids.

While students reacting to these qualities are not connoisseurs in the usual sense, and their reactions may be colored by quite peculiar expectations of school, still they are providing genuine data reflecting genuine experiences with the artifact loosely construed as the curriculum. An educational connoisseur (even the teacher herself) entering upon the scene would surely be able to provide us with insightful perceptions, and her report would have the advantage -- as does any legitimate art critic's -- of referring to a much broader context and seeing the particulars in a perspective which illuminates their meaning and their value. But neither teacher nor researcher can provide an insider's perspective; they can't really portray the lived-in quality of the curriculum. The students' informal (and partial, and biased, and probably distorted) "reviews" of their experiences may be as valuable as our neighbor's informal review of the latest movie in town, and they perform a similar function: they help us to see the situations in terms somewhat different from our own, and they encourage us to figure out <u>why</u>.

Informal reviews of schooling occur in many places. Teachers' lounges are infamous sources of teachers' perspectives on the curricular world, but students' reviews are offered in many contexts -- in groups leaving the classroom, at lockers, on school buses, at lunch, over the dinner table with family, over the telephone with friends. Students' off-hand comments about school may be as revealing as an overheard remark in a quiet gallery or an unexpected laugh five rows behind us in a darkened theater -- they provide us with information on how others are perceiving the same situation we are living through, and as such they enlarge our view of the impact of the work.

Except in cases of significant public outcry, we are rarely presented with the "informal reviews" by fellow citizens encountering works of art; the hue and cry over the series of abstract sculptures planned for the Nebraska stretch of I-80 a few years ago was one example, which made the papers and occasioned responses by public officials. But we rarely have a way of knowing average viewers' reactions to a work of art; I know of no studies of the gossip overheard in intermission at the theater or ballet, and I've seen no compilations of museum-goers' casual comments on an exhibit, though the possibilities suggest some fascinating studies. (Museum guards may be quite rich repositories of knowledge, actually). This "critical" knowledge of the general republic remains on the level of informal folk knowledge; it therefore suggests no easy parallels as to how to compile and interpret the informal curriculum reviews of students. My suggestions here, as a result, are ideas only; I've not been able to test them.

There are at least two ways that curriculum researchers could tap the curriculum knowledge of students from an art-criticism perspective. One is simply to listen to students' remarks to one another, and to base our own pieces of curriculum criticism on the perceptions of students as revealed in these unsystematic -- and not necessarily analytical -- observations on the work of art we call the curriculum. The other would be to involve students deliberately in the critical process -- to train them as art critics themselves. The first approach would maintain the researcher as external observer. The second approach would most nearly complete the analogy between curriculum criticism and art criticism, wherein the critic is the person actually experiencing the work.

Our experience with art criticism may suggest a few guidelines that could shape an effort to involve students as critics. One is that the student critic, like the art critic, should be familiar with the medium

and subject matter: as we would want a critic familiar with French Impressionism to critique an exhibit of Renoir's paintings, so we would want a student with some experience in the sciences to critique a science class. A second criterion is that the student critic should be one whose experience is parallel to that of other students likely to listen to him or her: perceptions affectiong students' choices of electives should preferably be offered by a student who had chosen to take the course. Thirdly, a student critic should be able to translate his or her experience of the curriculum into an ordinary language accessible to the rest of us: the student critic ought to be somewhat articulate and able to convey his/her impressions of the curriculum in terms that make sense to people thoroughly unfamiliar with it. Fourth, we would (I think) hope that the student critic could select and shape his/her perceptions into a coherent report, much as the art critic will select certain aspects of a work to discuss, rather than presenting a random collection of perceptions about all aspects of it. Some analysis and interpretation will be involved, suggesting that a good student critic will be one with good analytical and writing skills. Fifth, there may be a need for a sense of a public. The professional critic, writing for a deadline and sure to be published, operates under the constraints that public scrutiny imposes; he or she assumes that some people will read the piece and make tentative decisions based on it. Even the informal criticism among adult-movie-goers occurs in a give-and-take manner, with each other as audience. Few school assignments provide a sense of a "public" which will take action on the basis of an essay; for student criticism to be at all authentic, it would be helpful to provide a genuine purpose -- to plan a published collection of course evaluations for other students' use, perhaps, or to include the critiques in an appendix to a formal evaluation study.

The question of what training is most appropriate for critics is unresolved, and a bit thorny. The art critic for the San Fransisco Chronicle told me he had never taken an art history course in his 70-odd years, but had spent all of his free time since childhood hanging around art museums: sheer exposure (and love) seem to have done it. The movie and theater reviewer in my local newspaper is a history professor at the university; so is the art critic. Many book reviewers are writers themselves. I do not know what all critics have in common. A sensitivity to artistic expression is obviously essential, as is the ability to communicate well, but beyond that there seems to be a kind of intrinsic reward in making sense of artistic works -- a kind of challenge that resembles the "problem-solving" which Ecker (1963) attributes to the work of the artist. Thus, the analysis and interpretation required in good criticism may be rewarding in itself; to the extent that this process characterizes the elective work of some high-school students, then, we may find a starting point there.

Students involved in debate and forensics, for example, seem to thrive on an analysis and case-building similar to what criticism demands; students heavily involved in journalism reportage also enjoy and do well in the relatively quick analysis and reporting of new situations that newspaper work requires. It seems reasonable that student critics might be discovered and encouraged from those areas, which also have the advantage of demanding an audience and being judged by its members. While many such students might not know what "criticism" includes, a brief immersion in good examples of it (movie reviews, art reviews, and especially several different reviews of the same events) might prove insightful; a series of training assignments reviewing student productions and local movies might help to demonstrate. The point, however, would be to train students to be perceptive and critical

observers of their own schooling experiences, and not necessarily to have them develop essays similar in tone or style to full-fledged "art criticism". A focus on the lived-in qualities offered by, say, a week in an 11th grade history class -- its pacing, the fit of homework assignments to text, the readability and grippingness of the textbook, the teacher's attitude and degree of involvement in interpreting the materials, the sense of tension or boredom in the classroom -- would provide the necessary complement to the standard information on how much the students are learning and whether objectives are being met. If these perceptions are presented artfully, articulated in well-honed pieces of criticism, fine; but tapping them at all is ultimately more important. Any researcher working on such a project would undoubtedly re-interpret the students' critical products anyway.

Whether children younger than high school or junior high could effectively help us in identifying the aesthetic qualities of the curriculum they live is uncertain, though there is little reason to think they could not. We could not expect the sleek interpretations which some debate stars in high school might be able to produce, but through careful listening and good questioning we might be able to determine which aspects of schooling are most salient to young children and why. Our own responsibility in such a project would be to help the child focus on the actual school day, and not to get sidetracked with concerns about how well the teacher is teaching or what the child is learning. If we want to know how a dance performance affected a friend who has never seen modern dance before, we will not seek conclusions or generalizations; if we want to know how a third-grade child has reacted to her first encounter with a geography map, we will not test her knowledge. In both cases we want to know what they <u>saw</u> and what it was like.

To conclude

It would be irresponsible of me to dwell much more on the training of student critics, for my comments here are purely speculative. They are intended to suggest some directions we might take, and they include my best guesses as to what we might learn from this approach.

The more important point is that the use of student critics -- in whatever form they present their perceptions -- would address two major problems associated with the topic at hand. It would provide an appropriate vehicle for tapping students as a direct source of curriculum knowledge; that we have rarely done this seems like a tremendous waste of resources. And it would stretch the concept of curriculum criticism, covering the gap left in it by our assumptions that educational critics are educational researchers who have seen a new light: it would allow criticism to be done by people who authentically experience the work, as is the case in art criticism. It would reduce the saliency of the "omniscient outsider"'s view (my term) in which most educational research -- including curriculum criticism -- is couched, extending the participant-observer mode beyond ethnography to include genuine participants. The adult researcher would not be entirely eliminated, of course, since presumably a college professor or other grown-up evaluator is organizing the study and interpreting the results on yet another level, but it would at least present data from the perspective of those who actually experience the curriculum.

The possibilities inherent in bringing students into the knowledge-production activity of curriculum criticism are exciting. They add a dimension to the somewhat erudite concept of "criticism" which may make it more accessible to a lot of us, and the notion that there is a body of informally-communicated folk knowledge about the aesthetic dimensions of schooling is

intriguing. And if research into this area results in a kind of demythologizing of criticism, it will accomplish a lot. For it is noteworthy that "the arts" are frequently considered to be luxuries -- certainly so by the Reagan administration, for example -- and that serious communication about them may suffer from the same stigma. Yet if Susanne Langer (1957) is right in arguing that artistic knowledge is at least as powerful as the linear knowledge embodied in the sciences, then to tap this knowledge in students should release a wealth of information than has not been accessible to us until now.

I suspect that if we can successfully disguise these aesthetic insights as "data", we may be able to teach our colleagues quite a bit about how the curriculum works. I certainly hope so.

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